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Health

How to Win the Weight Battle

Tackling obesity the wrong way makes matters worse. Here's a right way

By Deborah Kotz

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Clarified on 9/19/07: *This story states that 17 percent of kids are now obese, which means they're at or above the 95th percentile for weight in relation to height. The reason that a greater percentage of kids now fall into the "top 5 percent" category is that the standard measurement charts that define obesity were created using data from the 1960s and '70s when kids weighed less than they do now.*



When busy parents like Dana and Brad Carpenter of Austin make family dinners, the kids learn balance and portion sizes. (Penny DesLosSantos)



Battling Childhood Obesity

Families now stuffing backpacks and greeting the children's new teachers face a crisis that makes falling test scores and rising college costs dull by comparison. Ten years and billions of dollars into the fight against childhood fat, it's clear that the campaign has been a losing battle. According to a report released last week by the research group Trust for America's Health, one third of kids nationwide are overweight now; other stats show that the percentage of children who are obese has more than tripled since the 1970s. Now, experts are worrying about the collateral damage, too: A 2006 University of Minnesota study found that 57 percent of girls and 33 percent of boys used cigarettes, fasting, or skipping meals to control their weight and that diet-pill intake by teenage girls had nearly doubled in five years. Last year, nearly 5,000 teens opted for liposuction, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons—more than three times the number in 1998, when experts first warned of a "childhood obesity epidemic."

"We've taken the approach that if we make children feel bad about being fat or scare them half to death, they'll be motivated to lose excess weight," says Joanne Ikeda, nutritionist emeritus at the University of California-Berkeley, who studies pediatric obesity prevention. "It hasn't worked in adults, so what makes us think it will work in kids?" Many experts now believe that an emphasis on dropping weight rather than adding healthful nutrients and exercise is doing more harm than good.

Failure to end—or even slow—the epidemic has public-health experts, educators, and politicians in a near panic. All told, some 17 percent of kids are now obese, which means they're at or above the 95th percentile for weight in relation to height for their age; an additional 17 percent are overweight, or at or over the 85th percentile. This is despite massive government-funded education campaigns in schools, in libraries, and on TV to alert parents and kids to the dangers. "In the early 1980s, I used to see one or two kids a year with type 2 diabetes, and now I see one or two a month," says Alan Lake, an associate professor of pediatrics at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. "Evidence now suggests that this type 2 diabetes progresses more rapidly in kids, which means we could be soon seeing 20-year-olds developing severe heart disease." Already, high blood pressure affects more than 2 million youngsters.

Long haul. Obesity is hard to outgrow, so about 50 percent of elementary-school kids and 80 percent of teens who are obese will battle the scales—and the greatly increased risk of disease—for the rest of their lives. A number of authorities have warned that

today's youth could be the first ever to have a shorter life span than their parents.

What explains both the problem and the elusiveness of a solution? Blame the American "toxic environment." Cinnamon buns and candy are far cheaper and easier to sell at the local mall than, say, a fresh fruit cup or a packet of sliced almonds. Half of kids walked or biked to school a generation ago; today, only about 10 percent do—then they come home and plop down in front of their various screens. As if the inactivity weren't bad enough, preteens absorb more than 7,600 commercials a year for candy, sugary cereal, and fast food, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. "They're surrounded by circumstances where the default behavior is one that encourages obesity," says Marlene Schwartz, deputy director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University. Busy parents contribute by stocking pantries with quick energy—sugary cereal, Fruit Roll-Ups, and Oreos—while bringing home Kentucky Fried Chicken for dinner.

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